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THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS ESCHATOLOGICALLY AND SOCIALLY INTERPRETED

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At the threshold of the attempt to interpret Jesus stands the Temptation narrative. Is it merely the reflection of the Old Testament account of the testing of God's son, Israel, in the wilderness, or of the well-known motif of an initial trial in the life of the great man like Hercules, Zoroaster, or Buddha? (So J. Estlin Carpenter, C. G. Montefiore.) Then it has little significance for the interpretation of Jesus' character and aims. Is it an attempt on the part of the early church to explain why he did not conform to current Jewish messianic ideals (B. Weiss), or to summarize the real temptations through which he fought his way to final victory (H. J. Holtzmann)? Then the passage has real value, for it is a statement of the critical issues of his life as they were understood by those who were nearest to him both in time and in sympathy. Its significance is greatest of all if, as commonly held, it is an attempt on the part of Jesus to describe in concrete symbol his spiritual experiences. This last view seems entirely natural, for as Sanday observes,

This is one of the most authentic things in the whole of the Gospels; and that for the reason that it lies entirely beyond the

reach of invention. Neither any one of the original disciples, nor the primitive Church as a body, had insight enough to invent it. That means that the story must ultimately have come from our Lord Himself.¹

Even more cogent seems the argument of Plummer:

His disciples would not have been likely to think that He could be tempted to evil; and, if they had supposed He could, they would have imagined quite different temptations for Him, as various legends of the saints show.²

Whether these experiences came upon Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry or not may be uncertain. One's decision on this point will depend upon his chronology of the development of Jesus' messianic consciousness—a most uncertain matter. The Gospel accounts plainly imply that he became aware of his mission at his baptism. If so, he might well have gone through an initial struggle as to its nature, but he certainly did not finish the struggle then. The tempter left him only "for a season." At no time was the conflict of opposing ideals fiercer than at Gethsemane. Now the account of the Temptation must have been given by Jesus to his disciples long after the beginning

¹ *The Life of Christ in Recent Research* (New York, 1908), pp. 109 f.

² *Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York: Scribners, 1909), p. 36. Plummer accepts also Sanday's argument just quoted.

of his ministry, probably after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. It would then of necessity be made richer and more definite by the recollection of the issues faced and fought out during the busy months just passed. Whether, therefore, we adopt the hypothesis that the Temptation narrative is autobiographical, or that it is an attempt of the early church to picture his inner struggles, there still is to be found in the account real biographical value, excellent material for the interpretation of Jesus' inner character and public purposes.

Furthermore, every canon of logic and literature demands that the account be read as an attempt to arrive at the implications of the messianic title, "Son of God." Our modern dogmatic difficulties over the term were of course unknown until long after the Gospels were written. John was proclaiming the imminence of the Kingdom of God. Jesus had just "accepted the badge of baptism in order to have a share in the blessings of the Kingdom,"¹ when he was informed by a heavenly voice that he was the special favorite of heaven, that is, the divinely appointed agent of the Kingdom. The question now was, What was to be the nature of that Kingdom? It was fully as live a problem then as it is now, for, as the extant apocalypses show, the beliefs of the Jews on the subject were just in process of formation and there was the greatest variety of assertion and expectation. Only against the uncertain and kaleidoscopic background of Jewish apocalyptic can the Temptation be interpreted.

Even in the twice-repeated "if" of the tempter we may well see an allusion

to one of the moot points of Jewish eschatology. While a personal temptation as to the reality and validity of Jesus' experience at his baptism is surely implied, that temptation was made the more cutting and subtle by one as to its meaning, due to the fact that many Jews did not expect any Messiah at all. Jesus was called upon to demonstrate his Messiahship in such a fashion that people would believe that there was to be a Messiah.

The fundamental inconsistency in the customary interpretations of the three temptations is that only the third—in the Matthean order—is understood in the light of popular Jewish expectations with regard to the coming of the Kingdom. It is almost universally agreed that the offer of the kingdoms of the world and their glory was a suggestion that Jesus adopt current Jewish nationalistic expectations. Two types are here involved. First is that ideal Davidic prince so attractively pictured in the Psalms of Solomon,

"a righteous king and taught of God, . . . pure from sin, . . . mighty thru the spirit of holiness, and wise thru the counsel of understanding, . . . tending the flock of the Lord with faith and righteousness, . . . the Lord Messiah."

He would "thrust out the sinners from the inheritance, utterly destroy the proud spirit of the sinners," but he would use no carnal weapons, for he was to "destroy the ungodly nations with the word of his mouth." Yet the nations were to "come from the ends of the earth to see his glory," for he was to "have mercy upon all the nations that

¹ Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus* (New York, 1916), p. 52.

come before him in fear.”¹ As Ryle and James point out, we have here a remarkably close parallel to the “idealization of ‘the Christ’ who was born into the world not half a century later than the time at which these Psalms were written.”² This remark sufficiently sets forth the fact that the early church did adopt this ideal of the Messiah in part, as its preservation of the Psalms proves. That such a temptation was psychologically possible to any Jew who believed himself to be the Messiah we can hardly doubt. He would certainly believe that God would empower him to do whatever the rôle demanded. The question for Jesus was, What did the rôle involve? That he did not accept the ideal of a Davidic prince is evidenced by the course of his ministry. His question with regard to the Messiah’s sonship indicates how unimportant he thought Davidic descent to be.³

The other type of expectation alluded to in this temptation was the Zelotic, the boldest and crudest form of the Jewish national hope. It was a rapidly growing menace in Jesus’ time, quite comparable to Bolshevism as currently estimated at the present moment.⁴ Jesus was probably more than once in danger of being forced into a decidedly compromising relation to this movement, if not actually into revolt against Rome. He died under the accusation of having

done so. No reformer, as he views the apparent failure of slower processes, can remain entirely blind to the allurements of the philosophy of “direct action.” It must often have cost Jesus a struggle to match spiritual methods to his spiritual aims.

The historical background of the second temptation has been very generally overlooked. It has been regarded as merely a test of Jesus’ personal trust in God. Recent expositors have often seen in it an epitome of the frequent requests of the Pharisees for signs from heaven. Stalker, a great many years ago, and, more recently, Kent⁵ have referred it to the apocalyptic expectations of the people that “the Messiah should appear suddenly and in some marvellous way.”⁶ It remained for Mr. Streeter to give the final and illuminating statement of this interpretation. He says,

If the kingdom is not to be established by the sword, it can only be by an act of God such as the Apocalyptists picture. But if so, is the Christ to wait and work, or should He by some startling act precipitate the consummation? The Son of Man was expected to appear in the sky with attendant angels. Should He then fling Himself from the highest pinnacle of the Temple in the sight of all Jerusalem, trusting that God, to save His Christ from destruction, would send a flight of angels to His support? Such an attempt to ‘force the hand’ of God,

¹ Psalms of Solomon, 17:23, 26, 27, 34-36, 38, 41, 42, 45.

² *Psalms of the Pharisees, Commonly Called the Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1891), p. lvii.

³ Mark 12:35-37 = Matt. 22:41-46 = Luke 20:41-44.

⁴ Cf. Sharman, *The Teaching of Jesus about the Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), pp. 109-120.

⁵ *Life and Teachings of Jesus* (“The Historical Bible”) (New York: Scribners, 1913), p. 67.

⁶ Stalker, *The Life of Jesus Christ*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Revell, 1891), p. 46.

inconsistent with the trust in the Heavenly Father taught elsewhere, is decisively rejected.¹

When one reads Daniel 7, I Enoch 39:7, 45-63; 70:1 f.; I Thessalonians 4:16 f.; Matthew 24; and IV Ezra 14:9, and in their light studies this temptation, he can hardly doubt that it was the picture of the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven which for a moment allured Jesus away from the course of his ministry. The same temptation assailed him repeatedly in the jeers and taunts of his opponents, "Show us a sign from heaven," for the seductive possibility would have been suggested to his mind, even though they were merely asking for a legitimation of his prophetic function. The difficulty was the more acute because he seems to have adopted the title, "Son of Man," as most nearly expressing his conception of his task.

How did Jesus' conception of the Son of Man differ from the current one? Did he at first reject this suggestion only at length to adopt it in the postponed form which became universal among his followers? These are questions we cannot now attempt to answer. But any interpretation of the apocalyptic of Jesus must reckon with this rejection of the ideal of the Messiah of the clouds during at least the earlier part of his ministry.

So far as I know, no one has attempted to give the first temptation an eschatological interpretation. But it seems obvious that if the second and third are to be thus explained, the first must also. The background of popular expectation is not far to seek. One of the constantly recurring features of apocalyptic expectation is the return to the earth of the fertility and abundance of the primitive Paradise. Another is the concept of the messianic feast.² The most extravagant expression of this expectation of material plenty is credited by Irenaeus to Jesus himself.³ In view of the frequent allusions to the idea in the Old Testament, the New Testament (Luke 13:29; 14:15), the Pseudepigrapha, and the rabbinic writings, there can be no doubt as to its wide currency.

Would not Jesus, as the Messiah, fulfil these popular expectations? The disciples must have repeatedly felt the pull of this anticipation, if not the pull of their own hunger, then that of the hungry multitudes. The temptation would come to Jesus. Would he not be able to win the multitude by the promise of future abundance? Had he not, as Messiah, the power to satisfy the hunger of mankind and should he not undertake to do so in the immediate future? The Lukan beatitude, "Blessed are ye that hunger now," and the Irenaeus quotation show that many Christians so

¹ *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought*, by Seven Oxford Men (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 101. I very recently came to this view through my own reflection, unaided, as I supposed, by outside suggestion. However I had probably read the above passage in *Foundations* previously and may have carried it subconsciously. McNeile's unfavorable estimate (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [London: Macmillan, 1915], p. 40) of Streeter's suggestion seems to be a mere reaction against a novel interpretation, for he attempts no argument.

² For numerous references see Boussett, *Religion des Judentums*² (Berlin, 1906), p. 327; Volz, *Jüdische Eschatologie* (Tübingen, 1903), pp. 350 f.

³ *Adv. haer.* v. 33, 3. It is an enlargement of I Enoch 10:19.

understood their Master. The Johanne account of the feeding of the five thousand is an attempt to spiritualize and mysticize the Synoptic story by reading in the idea, "not by bread alone," and so to blast any such materialistic hopes.

The three temptations, then, stand for three popular conceptions of the future Kingdom: the mythological abundance of Paradise returned to earth, the regal glory of a Davidic empire, and the supernaturalistic, catastrophic advent of an angelic Messiah. Certainly on this interpretation the Lukan order is preferable, as Mr. Streeter observes.¹ Jesus would most easily reject the ideal which makes the Kingdom only meat and drink; the militant political ideal and the devotion and enthusiasm of the Zealot would make more of an appeal, still more the conception of the Davidic prince with irresistible spiritual power. But nearest of all to his own conception and making the strongest impression upon his idealistic, mystical temperament was the highly spiritual conception of the angelic Messiah. Luke gives a truly climatic order. Students of the synoptic problem have often observed that Luke maintains the Markan order of events much more closely than Matthew.² The argument is reinforced in this case by the consideration that he

would be much less likely to make a change in his source in order to secure a climax which is real but not apparent, whereas Matthew, by putting last the offer of the kingdoms of the world and their glory, seems to reach the very acme of temptation.³ Again, whether Matthew's first two temptations are regarded from the point of view of eschatology or not, they are enticements to perform a miracle, while the last appears not to demand that kind of action. The Lukan order of the three temptations, then, compared with the Matthean, suggests that the Third Evangelist has preserved, though perhaps unconsciously, the original eschatological meaning of the incident, whereas Matthew has destroyed it. It was to be expected that the church, which had fallen a victim to the Messiah of the clouds delusion, would not understand the real meaning of the third temptation.⁴

What practical applications does the passage, thus explained, afford? Does not this historical, eschatological interpretation take us far away from our present problems? Do we not lose the devotional and hortatory values in which the Temptation narrative has always seemed so rich? If such were the result, it would not affect the truth or accuracy of the exposition. But we

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² W. Sanday, ed., *Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, by Members of the University of Oxford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 151 f.; G. D. Castor, *Matthew's Sayings of Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), pp. 9 f.

³ *Studies in the Synoptic Problem*, p. 152, against Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1914), p. 266, and Castor, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴ It is to be noted that on the eschatological interpretation miracle working, or supernatural intervention, is involved in every temptation. No Zealot was foolish enough to expect to overthrow the Roman Empire unless God fought for the Jews.

usually gain in practical exegesis when we get back to the original meaning of Scripture—rarely more than in this case.

First comes the temptation to materialism, whether in the individual or in society, but particularly with reference to social progress, for Jesus was thinking of the coming of the Kingdom. Pure economic determinism can have no fellowship with Jesus. Economic reconstruction, however necessary and valuable, cannot save the world. The reformer, the settlement worker, the socialist, the statesman who believes that merely by improving living conditions or remodeling the social order he can abolish the suffering and exploitation of the poor and put an end to international and interclass war, has fallen a victim to this temptation. Filling the hungry will be only an important incident in the Democracy of God.

The second temptation, following the Lukan order, is to undue personal ambition and imperialistic nationalism. Yet Jesus was tempted not so much to private ambition and Jewish particularism as to a wrong method of realizing his ideals. Certain Christian nations, among them our own, are facing this temptation in a peculiarly seductive form just now. To be sure, the narrow nationalism of the last century is still

enthroned in the Senate. But almost as dangerous is that idealistic and doctrinaire internationalism which sees in political action the panacea for all ills. No form of government, no league of nations, will usher in the Democracy of God. It comes, not in courts and constitutions, but in spirits.

Having gone thus far, we are psychologically prepared to succumb to the third temptation, as Jesus' earliest followers very generally did. If the Democracy of God cannot come by economic or political reorganization and evolution, then we humans are helpless. The alternative to social reform seems to be quietism or adventism. We must wait until God intervenes from heaven to save this wrecked old world. So says the premillennialist of our modern social endeavors.

Are we ready to doubt God's power to save the world? Back of Jesus' oriental realism was a social idealism and a spiritual enthusiasm which still feed our faith. In some way, by a combination of social action and spiritual forces, which are also social, the Democracy of God will come. The Temptation is a test of our faith in a spiritual God and the social ideal he has spoken to the soul in the high hour of its dedication to the great task.